

Notes on Roraima Trip, February 2000

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Dear CC's,

I haven't been writing much lately, and I've got free time on my assignment at BMG, so I'm just cutting loose. I always enjoy anything you guys write for me, so I'm sending this along unsolicited on the supposition that you feel the same way. Let me know if you'd rather I didn't send writings your way and also if you'd like me to move you from "CC" to "blind CC", to keep your address secret.

Picking up where we left off, I woke up in Santa Elena after sustained sleep in an actual bed and it felt great. Sunny, clear warm day. Quiet town. Curse number 19 of the budget traveler, the rooster, was far enough away not to wake me.

I shower and wander down the road toward the center of town. I pass the National Guard compound just as a few guardsmen in riot gear are coming out, loading into a jeep and taking off. In a moment of not so brief insanity, I consider trying to ask them why they are in riot gear.

I come to a nice big "Core" bank with an ATM machine on the side of it. Finally my chance to cash in for all those times I selected "Espanol" as the language on my home bank machines. But no. English is an option, and I take it. I try to get cash, but the machine says it is "unable to dispense cash at this time". Inside, they only can give a cash advance from a Visa card, which I did not bring, or American Express. My American Express card is an Optima card, and I'm not allowed to get cash from it for some reason I am unable to understand, despite my ATM Spanish practice.

The next bank, Banco National de Venezuela, I think, will accept only Visa cards. No biggie. Even if I don't find a bank to give me money, I've got about \$300 in cash I can exchange. I'm in town to find a tour company with a group planning to climb Roraima. The trip should take 6 days, and I got here pretty fast, so I can hang out for two or three days until I get it together. I find a place that will serve me a plate of fruit.

In the center of town I find what the riot gear was for. Some sort of demonstration. Not very noisy, just about one block of very calm chaos. A few dozen people chanting slogans and such, but not much of a hullabaloo. Not hardly even a hubbub.

Most of the tour operators I talk to calmly dismiss it all and explain that the trouble is "completely over now". But one operator, of Native Indian, not Venezuelan descent, tells me the road into town has been closed since midnight and that the governor is coming into town tomorrow to investigate the situation. I particularly like this explanation. How romantic, I'm

stuck in a sleepy little town, cut off from the outside world. I've got enough cash to last me a month, and reading material for at least a week.

Another tour guide, Richard at Khazen Tours, isn't particularly busy, so we hang out and discuss things. He explains, roughly, that right now in Venezuela people without land are trying to use some of the land of the people who have it but aren't using it all. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, the fine folks in 88 chartered a couple of buses, planning to come into Santa Elena to squat and set up tin shacks and whatnot. Apparently the fine folks of Santa Elena didn't think too much of that idea and stopped the buses at "the bridge".

I didn't know there was a bridge, but I guess there is, and I hear it's a great place for stopping buses. There was a ruckus, and something of a brouhaha, and the people all had to go back to 88 and, until today, that was pretty much the end of the issue. Today's demonstration was, according to Richard, landowners in town protesting squatters.

Kind of interesting. Imagine folks in, say, Ithaca, stopping a busful of po-folks coming into town because there weren't jobs for them? Well, I'm sure something like that did used to happen all the time. Especially if the bus was full of Blacks or Hispanics. In fact, isn't that sort of what the border with Mexico is all about?

In the background, the mountainside is burning.* What's that about, Richard? Every developing country I go to, unoccupied land is burning somewhere. "I don't know," he says. "Sometimes, the Indians are feeling bad. Or they are bored, so they just light some fires."

I gotta say, that's the best explanation I've heard. Clearing land? No, not here. Hunting? No, not on the edge of town. For kicks? Sure. That's why about half the brush fires are set in the US. Sure, it's by kids. But still. I know the feeling. A fire's exciting. It's different. It's something, at least.

Turns out there are very few travelers in town. Even tho it's the best time to travel in Venezuela, the dry season, it's not peak season for tourists. The fact that times are tough in Venezuela lately, negative economic growth and all, makes it worse. The only non-Venezuelans I found all day long are two Swiss guys who just took a bus in today from Manaus, Brazil, and an Italian guy who did the same thing yesterday. None of the three wants to spend six days climbing a mountain.

I do hear from a tour operator that the guy in the general store on the corner can give cash advances on MasterCard, so I can check him out in the morning. We four foreigners play pool and drink beers, which cost from fifty to seventy-five cents apiece (both the pool and the beers), and by about one AM, eventually we end up in a deserted discotheque where we buy a couple of martinis for the two prostitutes there, just for something new.**

In case you're wondering, these two girls are around 19 years old, Brazillian, and only in town for a few days. They're making the circuit of southern Venezuela towns, as will many others to follow them. I don't speak enough Spanish or Portuguese to participate in the conversations, and it's nice to not have to talk for a while.

By now I've figured out that there are no groups in town of travelers at all, let alone groups forming to climb Roraima and if I want to climb this mountain that I came all this way to climb, I'm going to have to arrange to do it alone. That means I'll have to pay 100% of the price of the jeep to take me and my guide up the road to Paratepui, where the trailhead is, (\$80 or so), an English-speaking guide (\$40 per day), food (about \$40) and camping equipment (\$25 or so).

But I'm short about a hundred bucks, and the places that are willing to arrange a trip for me and let me pay with a Visa card are the ones that charge about twice those prices.

In the morning I go straight to the corner general store where they told me I could certainly get money for my Visa card, only to find out from the frosty lady that they don't do money from "tarjetas" whatsoever. I go to the Servivensa airline ticket office, where I can buy a ticket with my Visa card, but they can't comprehend the simple procedure that would allow me to get some cash in addition.

There's a nice new hotel a few miles outside of town, the Hotel Grand Sabana. For \$1.50 I take a taxi out there. The place is pretty much deserted; the manager is out and altho they do take MasterCard, the girl at the front desk is absolutely certain she can't give me money from it no matter what commission I offer her. She does say however, that in town, Senor Castano can perform that operation for me. She writes his name down and assures me that any taxi driver will know who that is.

It's not a busy road, but soon a taxi comes by. Yes, he knows Sr. Castano, and for another \$1.50 I ride back into town. The taxi drops me off right in front of the general store where the frosty lady turned me away about an hour earlier. Yes, that's Sr. Castano's store. Why does everybody think that guy can turn plastic into gold?

In a final futile gesture, Richard, the nice guy at the tour agency, drives me around in his company jeep to both banks and a resort/restaurant he knew, speaking Spanish and explaining my situation. But no. No money for Kurt from MasterCard, Amex, or ATM card***.

The only thing Richard can do for me is drive me to San Francisco de Yurani, about an hour and a half down the road, an Indian town where an English speaking guide he knows lives. They also have equipment to rent in San Francisco. So hey, you never know.

In SFO de Y, he introduces me to Donald, who does indeed speak English pretty well, and he seems like a nice guy, the kind of guy you wouldn't mind sharing a tent with and cooking with and living with for six days or so. Most importantly, he's willing to work with me on the money thing.

Here's the deal. We'll buy the food, we'll do the trip, (he knows of a jeep already going up to Paratepui tomorrow, so that'll save some money), and when we get back, we'll take the overnight bus together to Puerto Ordaz, where the streets are paved with gold and the banks take all plastic. I'll pay him the rest of the money there and then fly to anywhere I want; Donald will catch the next bus back to San Francisco.

Just like that.

I write up a little agreement, and we go out to the road to catch the next bus back to Santa Elena. We buy groceries and cooking gas that night and by 2:00 the next afternoon, we're having lunch in the jungle.

*previously mentioned in my e-mail

**They want "martini's", but only in America is that a liquor drink. They get Martini and Rossi, a name brand vermouth, on the rocks; and I figure they order it mainly because it's expensive and it behooves them to do well by the bartender.

***Richard was surprised to hear that the ATM machine even worked at all. He said he'd never seen anyone use it. I assume it's just there because the plans for the building included it.

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